

# **The Road Less Traveled: Trailblazing Horsewomen**

By: Michael Phelps, Graduate Student Intern

## **Unique Life Stories**

Many life stories of horsemen and women reveal telling similarities. Yet, there are also individuals whose stories are unique because they are different from their peers. They stand apart from the crowd and walk the road less traveled within the equine industry. As African American horsewomen, Eliza Carpenter and Sylvia Harris were already exceptional. Their biographies tell of the singular nature of these special women. Both Harris and Carpenter set out to create lives that they wanted for themselves.

### **Eliza Carpenter**

In the 1890's, America was in the throes of a severe economic depression. The federal government announced it would open land, recently bought from the Cherokees. They held a land rush for hopeful homesteaders. Eliza Carpenter was one of an estimated 100,000 who competed for one of the 42,000 available claims.

She won land near Ponca City, Oklahoma and started a successful horse training and racing business in her new home. Carpenter was one of very few African American stable owners in the American West. She trained (and even at times rode) winners at racetracks across the region.

### **Sylvia Harris**

When she was in her 30's, Sylvia Harris lost custody of her children and lived out of a car while struggling with bipolar depression. She had dreamed of working with horses, beginning with childhood visits to Northern California tracks with her father. But Harris had very little experience and scant employment opportunities.

When her car was stolen, a minister at the homeless shelter where she stayed connected Harris with a job on a horse farm. The farm's owner passed away not long after. Still motivated by the desire to become a jockey, she moved to Chicago, working her way up from exercise rider to racing longshots. In her 17th race, she found herself atop a winner and realized her childhood

### **Human Triumph**

Faced with hard times, Harris and Carpenter both showed tenacity and grit that surpassed any old West cowboys. A bit of hearsay printed in Carpenter's obituary claimed that, when faced with the prospect of losing out on the proceeds of a bet that a man refused to pay, she landed a blow to both his jawline, and to his pride, effectively ending the quarrel.<sup>1</sup>

Physical fortitude and mental toughness helped them overcome their difficult and isolating circumstances. When asked about her odyssey to become a jockey, Harris summed up a common element that described both of these women when she noted, "Human triumph, that is what it comes down to."<sup>2</sup>

## Sources

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## Footnotes

1 "Fans Mourn Woman Jockey."

2 Finley, "Riding Horses Helps in Hurdling Obstacles for Rookie Jockey."